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ABSTRACT

Adolescents are able to respond correctly to questions about pregnancy risk and contraceptive use, yet still engage in risk-taking behavior. One explanation for this phenomenon may be the existence of a personal fable. To explore the existence of the personal fable in inner-city female adolescents, 22 eighth grade black females in Chicago completed two tests. The first, the Ability to Say No in a Pressured Sexual Situation Scale, consists of 12 stories describing situations in which an inner-city female might find herself in relation to males. The girls first responded to the stories for a girl-friend, and then for themselves. The second instrument measured the girls' perceptions of future life choices. They again responded for a girl-friend and for themselves. The results showed the girls were capable of accurately describing life in their neighborhood and their friends' probable responses to sexual pressure, but also were able to maintain that what happens to others will not happen to them. While this research supports the concept of a personal fable as one aspect of the early adolescent's sexual identity, longitudinal research is needed. (KGB)

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DEFINING SEXUALITY AMONG FEMALE BLACK INNER-CITY YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

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DEFINING SEXUALITY AMONG FEMALE BLACK INNER-CITY YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

The social issue of adolescent pregnancy has caused renewed concern about the nature of adolescent sexuality and the social and psychological factors which precipitate pregnancy among teenagers. Theorists have achieved consensus that adolescent sexuality must be studied from an interdisciplinary perspective with equal consideration given to biological, sociological, and psychological factors (Chilman 1983; Midnick and Oskamp 1982; Petersen and Boxer 1982). In adolescence, acquiring a comprehension of what it means to be sexual occurs at the onset of major physical changes which coincide with new cognitive abilities. Adolescents begin formulating and revising a concept of sexuality based on the changes in their bodies in relation to the numerous and often conflicting messages that are transmitted by parents, peers, and the media. This concept is modified as new information and experiences are assimilated. It is within this constantly changing understanding of what it means to be sexual that adolescent sexual activity takes place. Just as pregnancy risk is not evenly distributed throughout the population of adolescents, the meaning of sexual behavior varies from community to community. Therefore, the broader outlines which have described a theory of adolescent sexuality must be adapted to the variations that exist within specific sub-populations or communities. This paper originates in research that was conducted to inform and improve a pregnancy prevention program in a black inner-city neighborhood in Chicago, an area where it has been estimated that 21% of all females become pregnant by age 17 (Hogan and Kitagawa 1985). We have used our experience with a group of seventh and eighth grade females to help extend the existing theories of adolescent sexuality.

Engaging in sexual intercourse is partially dependent on the social milieu in which the adolescent lives. The fact that black female adolescents are more likely than white adolescents to be sexually active and that they are also more likely to engage in intercourse at a younger age (Zelnik, Kantner, and Ford 1981) is in part explained by the poverty and racism which limit the life options of black adolescents (Chilman 1978; Moore and Burt 1982, Stack 1975). Aspirations for educational and social advancement are quickly quelled by social reality (Chilman 1978). Young women with lower educational expectations, vague educational goals, and lower levels of educational achievement are more likely to initiate sexual activity at an early age, and they have a higher rate of sexual involvement as well (Devaney 1981; Udry, Bauman, and Morris 1975; Furstenberg 1976; Jessor and Jessor 1975). Black female teens who have experienced a pregnancy are more likely to have unmarried parents, lower SES, greater numbers of siblings, and older sisters who were teenage mothers (Hogan and Kitagawa, 1985).

Demographic and ethnographic work, which is useful in describing what social factors contribute to pregnancy risk, cannnot explain how the early adolescent perceives and comprehends

the social world to which she is exposed. Does the social scientist's view of the life of the inner city adolescent coincide with the view held by the girl? Is the girl aware that life opportunities may be limited? Does she feel that she is capable of resisting the sexual pressure? We have little understanding of how the adolescent female perceives and interprets the multitude of values and behaviors to which she is exposed, nor do we know how she situates herself in her social milieu. Understanding an adolescent's perceptions of her daily reality is necessary if we are to be effective in helping her to prevent pregnancy.

One aspect of the environment which has received limited discussion in the adolescent sexuality literature and which is becoming evident in our work with young girls is that of sexual pressure (Furstenberg 1976; Cvetkovich and Grote 1980) . Our clinical experience has shown that the pressure girls face to have sexual intercourse is a critical factor in their engagement in sexual activity. This pressure appears to be omnipresent. It may be very personal such as when a boyfriend makes sexual intercourse a precondition for maintaining a relationship. Often the pressure can be considered harassment. The catcalls and lewd gestures begin when the girls are young and seem to pervade their environment. While early concepts of romance may come from television, the girls are telling us that early sexual experiences may take place in the elevator or behind the dumpster. The question of whether adolescent females believe in pre-marital intercourse may be moot if sexual experiences are taking place in a milieu of pressure and violence.

In examining her perceptions, we must account for the cognitive transition that the early adolescent is going through as she begins to acquire formal operations. Elkind (1967) has described the psycho-social consequences of emergent formal operations for adolescents. He sees adolescent egocentrism coming into conflict with the young person's growing capacity to conceptualize the thought of others. One major consequence of this conflict is the emergence of the personal fable. The adolescent begins to "overdifferentiate" between his or her feelings and those of others. The young teen experiences feelings as something special and unique, something that no one else can fully comprehend. The adolescent gains a sense of invincibility in which natural laws, such as those relating to mortality or fertility, do not apply. While the existence of a personal fable has been hypothesized and has been described as it relates to adolescent sexuality, there has been no empirical evidence to suport its existence, beyond the original work conducted by Elkind in the domain of adolescent religiosity (Cvetkovich, Grote, Bjorseth, & Sarkissian 1975; Elkind 1967; Long, Elkind, & Spilka 1967). The research presented here is a beginning effort to provide such evidence.

The presence of a personal fable presumes that the adolescent is cognizant of the world that surrounds her. She must be aware of the pressures that she faces, if she is to believe

that she can overcome them. Adolescents are able to respond correctly to questions about pregnancy risk and contraceptive use (Herz, Goldberg, & Reis, 1984; Kirby 1984) yet they still engage in risk-taking behavior. We suspect that the existence of the personal fable is one factor which contributes to this phenomenon. We felt that by exploring the personal fable of the inner-city female adolescent, we could begin to understand how she perceives her community and how she integrates that understanding into her personal explanation for her behaviors.

SUBJECTS. The subjects for this study were 22 eighth grade girls who were students in an elementary school on the west side of Chicago. The girls were randomly selected from a group of volunteers for whom parental consent had been obtained. All were black. While half of these girls participated in a pregnancy prevention program, participation had no effect on the results described in this paper. The mean age of the girls was 13 years, 3 months. Their seventh grade Iowa test normal curve equivalent scores were 41.8 for reading and 51.2 for math. On Iowa test scores, these girls did not differ from the other seventh graders in their school. They live in a neighborhood in which 66% of the families have a female head and 49% of the families are in poverty (Chicago Fact Book Consortium, 1984). The birthrate for 15-19 year old females is 152 per 1,000, one of the highest in the city (The Ounce of Prevention Fund, unpublished data).

INSTRUMENTS. Two instruments were developed to explore the existence of the personal fable in the inner-city adolescent. One instrument administered was The Ability to Say No in a Pressured Sexual Situation Scale (ANPSSS). This scale consists of twelve stories which describe situations that a young girl living in the inner city might find herself in with relation to boys or men. The scenarios were created from listening to the stories told by the girls in our prevention programs. The language utilized in these stories was developed with the assistance of several young adult black women. The girls completed a Likert-type scale designed to measure the ease with which one is able to say no in a given pressured sexual situation. The scale was given in two parts. First the girls were asked to respond to the twelve situations and describe how a girlfriend would respond. This was intended to tap how the adolescent perceived her community's norms. Then the stories were presented a second time, and the girls were asked to hypothesize how they personally would respond to the situations. By comparing the second form to the first we are able to determine whether girls predict different behavior for themselves than they do for other girls in the community; in other words do they maintain a personal fable?

The second instrument measured the girls' perceptions of future life choices. Twelve items were asked on a Likert scale about the likelihood of a person getting pregnant before finishing high school, living on welfare, going to college, and so on. As with the sexual pressure instrument, two parts were administered, the first in which the girl describes herself and

the second in which she describes the future life of a friend or a neighbor. Again, by contrasting the two forms, we can see if adolescents' visions of themselves differ from their perceptions of community norms.

ADMINISTRATION. The tests were administered in a school classroom during the school day. No school personnel were present in the testing room. A black female tester who was not known to the girls read each item orally as the girls followed in their test packet.

RESULTS.

Reliability. Cronbach's alphas were computed for both forms of each scale as a measure of reliability. Chronbach's alpha for the ANPSS Self Scale is .845, and for the ANPSS Other Girl Scale is .561. Cronbach's alpha for the Future Life Choices Self Scale is .755. The score for the Future Life Choices Other Girl Scale is .796.

Self and Girlfriend Forms. For both the sexual pressure and the future life choices the self and girlfriend forms of the instrument were compared using paired t-tests. The results are presented in Table 1. For the Perception of Future Life Choices Scale, a higher score reflects a perception of a more middle class future. The mean score for the Self Form was 46.6 and the mean score for the Girlfriend Form was 34.3. This difference produced a t score of 5.7, significant at the .0001 level. For the Ability to Say No in a Pressured Sexual Situation a higher score means a greater perceived ability to resist pressure. The mean score for the Self Form was 78.6 and the mean score for the Other Form was 60.3. The t-score equals 5.03 which is also significant at the .0001 level.

These findings argue strongly for the presence of a personal fable. The girls are capable of accurately describing the life in their neighborhood. Premarital pregnancy at a young age, welfare dependency, and limited job prospects are likely, and the girls know it. Yet they maintain that what happens to girls in the neighborhood will not happen to them. They believe that they will own their own cars, travel, and have exciting careers. When looking at the more specfic situation of responding to sexual pressure the findings are the same. At one level, these girls are cognizant of the difficulty of resisting sexual pressure. In describing their girlfriends' hypothetical responses, they imply that pressure takes its toll and that girls will have sexual intercourse even when they do not want to participate. On the other hand, they perceive themselves as invincible and cabable of resisting where their friends succumb.

It is important to note that while the results of the sexual pressure and future opportunities tests support one another, they may tap different psychological processes involved in the operation of the personal fable. Table 2 presents the correlation matrix between the forms of each scale. The strong

correlation between the self-behavior in a pressured situation and self-perception of future life choices ($r = .68$, $p < .0005$) suggests that girls who have strong fables in one area maintain them in the other. More interesting, however, is the contrast between the significant correlation that exists between the self and girlfriend forms of the sexual pressure questionnaire ($r = .49$, $p < .05$) and the lack of correlation between the self and girlfriend forms of the future opportunities scale ($r = -.23$, n.s.).

What may cause this difference is the way that adolescent egocentrism influences this task. There is the possibility that the sexual pressure scale functions partially as a projective test in a way that the future opportunities test does not. The future opportunities scale is grounded in everyday experience. The subjects have seen the welfare checks and the premarital pregnancies in their neighborhood. While they must take the role of the other in completing the instrument, they need not hypothesize about the others' psychological state. It is easy to differentiate between the self and the other, and therefore there is no correlation between the self and other forms. Cognitively, the sexual pressure scale is a more complex task. The girls have no direct experience of how their friends' respond to sexual pressure, and so the subjects must be able to both assume the role of the other and hypothesize the other's reaction. Because the girls may not have fully acheived formal operations, their egocentrism influences their responses to the Girlfriend form, in which they partially project their own possible response. The sexual pressure scale may also be a more emotionally laden task. Clearly for eighth grade girls issues of sexuality carry more psychic "weight" than those of future living arrangements. In discussing future life events, the girls can distance themselve from their conceptions of their girlfriends' lives. However, when contemplating the fairly explicit sexual situations described in the scale, the differention of self and other becomes more difficult.

While this research supports the concept of a personal fable as one aspect of the early adolescent's sexual identity, more work remains to be done. If this phenomenon is truly developmental, we would anticipate a diminution of differences between the self and other scales over time. The girls should become less convinced of their invulnerability. Longitudinal work is required. Equally important is investigation of the relationship between the fable and behavior. Hypothetically, the sexually active adolescent who maintains a strong fable will be less likely to use contraception.

The presence of the fable has strong implications for those concerned with pregnancy prevention. The personal fable may explain why knowledge of the reproductive system and contraception has no bearing on contraceptive behavior (Chilman 1983; Cvetkovich and Grote 1975; Miller 1976; Monsour and Stewart 1973). Clearly sex education may be necessary but not sufficient to combat adolescent pregnancy. Elkind (1982) argues attitudes

can be changed through reflective abstraction and that reflective abstraction is more likely to take place when the "new" reality is presented by someone to whom the early adolescent is attached. This suggests that with early adolescents a traditional sex education format may be insufficient if the goal of the program is to prevent very early pregnancies. In addition a more supportive atmosphere may be in order where the teenagers can idealize the instructor and can discuss their personal realities. Looking collectively at personal fables goes beyond the current vogue of "values clarification" exercises. We must help the adolescents accept the reality they perceive as effecting their own lives, if we are going to begin to help adolescents combat the problems of growing up in the inner city.

Table 1

Differences Between Self and Other Scores

	Self	Other Girl	t
Sexual Pressure			
Mean	78.6	60.3	5.03*
S.D.	18.9	14.1	
Future Choices			
Mean	46.6	34.4	5.70*
S.D.	6.1	6.8	

* p < .0001

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Between Sexual Pressure And Future Choices Scores

	Sexual Pressure Self	Sexual Pressure Other	Future Choices Self	Future Choices Other
Sexual Pressure				
Self	1.00			
Other	.49*	1.00		
Future Choices				
Self	.68**	.48*	1.00	
Other	-.08	-.12	-.23	1.00

* p < .05
** p < .001

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